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ABSTRACT

In June 1999, nearly 40 researchers and specialists in youth development gathered to participate in a conference entitled "Creating Citizenship: Youth Development for a Free and Democratic Society." This executive summary identifies a number of qualities and capacities of young people that are essential for achieving the goals of engaging in society and becoming politically developed. The summary outlines the experiences that promote these qualities and capacities, and registers concern about the present lack of opportunities for youth to communicate their own political and cultural expressions to a wide range of groups and engage in constructive dialogue. According to the summary, creating meaningful change in policy, practice, and research is important. The summary provides historical background information about creating citizenship in the next generation and the participation of youth in civil society. It contends that there is new interest in creating citizenship opportunities for young people. It also finds that there is a need to identify the precursors in adolescence of adults' active involvement in the community and in all levels of the political system. The paper pinpoints some arenas of action, such as the neighborhood or community, youth organizations, and schools, and calls for supporting programs with research, especially new research in methods and measures for evaluating existing or planned programs. (BT)

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Stanford Center on Adolescence

# Creating Citizenship: Youth Development for Free and Democratic Society

## Executive Summary - Conference Consensus Document

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## Creating Citizenship: Youth Development for Free and Democratic Society

In June 1999, nearly forty researchers and specialists in youth development gathered under the auspices of the Stanford Center on Adolescence, at the invitation of William Damon (its Director), to participate in a conference entitled "Creating Citizenship: Youth Development for Free and Democratic Society." Faculty and doctoral students (from sociology, psychology, education, political science, anthropology, medicine, and law) from nine universities in the United States as well as from England, Germany, Israel, Northern Ireland, and Poland attended. Prior to the meeting a convening paper had been circulated to participants laying out the research base concerning youth development in the area of citizenship.[1] The schedule included introductory speeches, brief presentations by the visiting researchers, a session convened by youth leaders from organizations in the San Francisco area, and several working group sessions. On the last day of the conference a draft version of a consensus paper was presented and critiqued as the first step in a continuing process intended to revitalize this area of study. The revised text of that paper, which also constitutes the Executive Summary for the conference, is found below, followed by some background and a summary of the content of the conference discussions leading up to the Consensus Document. The conference was supported by a grant to the Stanford Center on Adolescence from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

### Executive Summary - Conference Consensus Document

In order to sustain a society where democratic governance and civil discourse thrive and where the psychosocial development of members of that society is fostered, opportunities to engage in civil society and in the political system should be widely available.

To prepare them to contribute to this kind of society and to foster their political development, young people need face-to-face interpersonal experience in contexts and organizations that are meaningful to them. They should have opportunities to take part in groups and to engage in activities that advance the public good; that incorporate them in reciprocal social networks; and that embody respectful conduct toward familiar and unfamiliar individuals. Young people should acquire the knowledge and capacities that prepare them to understand and actively participate in the political system.

We have identified a number of **qualities and capacities** of young people that we believe are essential in achieving these goals:

> A civic identity that includes commitment to a larger sense of social purpose and a positive sense of affiliation with the society.
>
> An awareness that decisions made in the public political process directly and indirectly affect their private lives and futures.
>
> Knowledge and the capacity to acquire information necessary to navigate the social and political world, including an understanding of democracy and the functioning of its institutions, current issues of importance, and modes of participation that are likely to be effective.
>
> A balance between trust and skepticism and a constructive tension between support for

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[1]This paper was prepared by Judith Torney-Purta, Professor of Human Development at the University of Maryland in College Park, who was a Visiting Scholar at the Stanford Center on Adolescence during the Spring Quarter 1999.

legitimate authority and willingness to dissent in relation to the political system and civil society.

The capacity for making autonomous choices and decisions.

The capacity and willingness to engage in shared discourse which is tolerant of other opinions and dissent.

Respect for other individuals and the groups to which they belong.

Skills of cooperation and negotiation, including the ability to work in a team and present an effective argument for one's views without denigrating the views of others.

The willingness and ability to assume leadership roles when appropriate.

Belief in their ability to make a difference by acting alone or with others, including a belief that institutions should be responsive to such actions.

**To promote these qualities and capacities**, we believe that the following experiences are important and should be available to all young people, consistent with their developmental needs:

Sustained contact with organizations that treat young persons with respect, operate according to civil rules of conduct, and create opportunities for the safe expression of views.

Civic education in schools that provides an experience of democratic society. This means education that enables students to acquire meaningful knowledge about the political and economic systems, to recognize the values of democratic society, to discuss important and potentially controversial issues, to find personally meaningful role models, and to understand the contribution made by organizations in civil society including advocacy groups.

Opportunities to reflect about the meaning of experiences they have in their communities for their personal and political identities.

Education about the media that encourages young people to read newspapers and to be critical consumers of print, television, video, and Internet sources.

Opportunities for youth to communicate their own political and cultural expressions to a wide range of groups and to engage in constructive dialogue.

We believe there is **reason for concern** about this area. Significant numbers of young people are not acquiring important capacities because the experiences listed above are not readily available, not widely known, or underutilized. Indicators that fuel our concern include:

Low rates of voting participation among newly enfranchised voters.

Indifference or unthinking distrust of public figures.

Declining willingness to assume leadership roles in formal political and civic organizations among young adults.

Non-inclusion and discrimination experienced by minority and disadvantaged youth.

Acts of incivility and violence among young people from all sectors of society.

We believe that the following **policies and practices exacerbate this negative situation**:

Cultural messages (from families, media, and other sources) which exaggerate values of marketplace success and of power.

An absence of opportunities for ongoing and reflective engagement in their communities for many sectors of the youth population.

A lack of connection between the institutions in which young people are engaged as adolescents and those institutions which it will be their responsibility to shape when they become adults.

In order to deal with these issues, we believe it is important to create meaningful change in policy, practice, and research. The remainder of this document presents background and lays out some initiatives suggested during the conference.

## Background

Creating citizenship in the next generation and the participation of youth in civil society are part of a complex and multi-faceted process. Although the term "a civic crisis for the next generation of citizens" may be too strong, individuals across a variety of disciplines -- the general public as well as those who work with adolescents -- express concern. Some cite the small proportion of newly eligible voters who cast a ballot. Others are concerned about declining levels of trust in public institutions. Still others point to violence, or to the disinclination of most adolescents to move beyond self interest to involvement in the broader community (including political participation).

Some observers blame parents (for spending too little time either with their children or volunteering in their communities). Some blame peer groups (which are so influential in individual identity formation yet often resist adult norms). Some blame television, popular music or the Internet (especially the prevalence of violent themes). Some blame public officials (for behavior which does not merit trust), or the mass media (for emphasizing and sensationalizing such behavior). Some blame the political parties (for ignoring young adults). Some blame the schools for failing to have high academic standards (though others blame an overemphasis on preparing students for knowledge tests supplanting other goals of participatory civic education).

Starting in the late 1950's and extending through the 1970's there was considerable research related to these issues, especially under the rubric of political socialization. Researchers investigated political attitudes and behavior in students as young as second graders and extending through high school, with some studies following these cohorts into adulthood. Much of this research was conducted by political scientists concerned about tracing political partisanship from generation to generation, about assessing the sources of diffuse support for the national political system, or (toward the end of this period) about understanding the roots of student protest. Many of the measures used in adult election studies, such as political efficacy, were administered to young people. Some psychologists and sociologists interviewed or surveyed youth, often focussing on attitudes toward authority, law, the nation, or economics. Some social studies educators collected information to shed light on the effectiveness of particular curricular models. A few scholars pointed to the divergences between the socialization of white and of Hispanic or African American young people, especially those coming from underprivileged backgrounds. Communication researchers investigated topics such as the level of interest in political news.

A single study from the late 1960's which had concluded that taking civics classes did not enhance civic knowledge or engagement was widely cited during this period. It was seldom criticized as it became increasingly out of date or for failing to distinguish between different modes of instruction. Several studies in the 1970's, including one conducted in nine countries, found that civic education classes characterized by the discussion of controversial issues were more likely to engage students and result in knowledge and interest in politics than was the rote memorization of factual material. At the local level, however, educators thought it was risky to encourage the classroom discussion of issues which might divide the community, whatever the research conclusions. Other school subjects were of much higher priority. Although economic education became entrenched in the curriculum guidelines of several states, its goals were often isolated from those of civic education. While the economic system was becoming more globally interdependent, terms such as "preparation for global citizenship" were called into question in many school districts citing fears that students might become less patriotic.

In the 1980's interest in this entire research area declined substantially. An article in the late 1980's referred to the "bear market" in political socialization research. Increased cynicism did not cause much public concern during this period, even when especially obvious trends in this direction appeared among young people. Fewer and fewer political scientists saw youth as an interesting group to study.

In the 1990's new interest among political scientists, educators, sociologists, and psychologists has resulted in a number of conferences and publications of research and policy documents on political socialization and civic education. Articles intended for wider audiences have also appeared. An analysis of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress refuted the assertion accepted since the 1960's, that civics classes do not make a difference for students' knowledge or attitudes. Political socialization has been reframed as a process involving reciprocal communication and modeling. No longer is it a simple matter of socialization agents transmitting their own point of view without taking into account the reactions (or even resistance) of the young.

Ten years ago "civil" rarely appeared as a modifier except for "civil rights." Recently the term "civil society" has become enshrined in public and professional discourse. This concept refers to citizens acting collectively to exchange ideas and information, bound by shared and often implicit rules. One purpose of action within civil society is to make demands on the government or to hold its officials accountable, but civil society is a broader concept. Organizations encompassed by civil society include those with cultural, informational, religious, educational, and civic purposes, as well as interest and issue-oriented groups. Rules of civil society include respect for differences, rights to dissent, respect for individual rights, trust in institutions, and advancing the public good. The term "civicness" has been used to denote an orientation which includes reciprocity, cooperation, sharing in a common experience, and trust. A renewed concern about these capacities and what some call "civility," or "civil discourse" among young people has been prompted by this interest in civil society.

### A Positive (as well as a Negative) View of the Issue

There is new interest in creating citizenship opportunities for young people. Those debating the issue sometimes talk past each other, however, because of differing assessments of the extent or nature of the problem. Indicators to show decline or increase in youth civic involvement have remained limited to voting rates or, more recently, scores on tests assessing knowledge of government. Expanding the meaning of citizenship based on an analysis of the ideas connected with "civil society" could provide more satisfying directions and indicators.

Although it is tempting to focus on the negative, we can also consider adolescents' emerging qualities as assets to civil society. Alienation from some institutions could be seen as serving to

motivate involvement in others. What is sometimes called impulsiveness could be seen as a source of energy. What seems to be grandiosity could be seen as openness to being captured by an ideal. Concreteness could be viewed as a willingness to work toward short term goals and persist in looking for results. Young people are willing to take risks, but they also are willing to take action when they feel strongly, and this can result in empowerment and efficacy. Many adolescents know a great deal more about the new communications and information media than their elders, and they are often enthusiastic about using this knowledge to mobilize others toward a common goal or to share art or music they have created. Further, young people's familiarity with making decisions in the consumer economy may prepare them to make some political choices. In the face of increasing isolation, discrimination, marginalization and inequality, many youth recognize that they have a stake in promoting equality and harmony in a diverse society. All these assets can lead to mature forms of action and leadership if there are creative ways to interest young people, to develop their capacities, and to provide avenues for their involvement.

To change youth requires changing adults (the policies they formulate and the programs they design). Many systems and organizations seem to offer little to students to help them express the pro-social motives they have developed with their families in the broader community or to transfer the skills of social action they have developed with their peers to the political system at the local, state, or national level. This is one of several instances of disconnection. To give another example, young people have few opportunities to see connections between voting (or other political activity) and actual policy results (either in their student governments or in the political arena more generally).

One promising way to formulate the problem is to say that we need to identify the precursors in adolescence of adults' active involvement in the community and in all levels of the political system. We need to "create sandlots for the development of citizens."

**Arenas of Action**

The neighborhood or community is increasingly becoming a site or space for positive everyday experiences of civil society. Membership organizations such as religious groups, neighborhood associations, tutoring or peer mediation projects (and a host of others) often maintain themselves over long periods, even if they are not formally organized. They are frequently based on deeply held value commitments. They offer a sense of possible futures, including sites for commitment and identity development. Youth feel they have a personal stake in these organizations because they provide options for real choices (including peers and personal goals), as well as respected role models. Some of these organizations are finding ways to enhance respect for social diversity with a meaning constructed by the youth themselves (and not forms of tolerance dictated by adults). Developing an understanding of how these groups function is vital.

Youth organizations frequently are able to offer small group projects which are involving and from which adolescents can see benefits; these are characteristics which are valued and sometimes even expected by today's youth . At their best these organizations can offer experiences with commonly agreed upon rules, recognition of the rights of individuals to dissent, and constructive ways to deal with the inevitable frustrations of group activity. More formal political organizations seldom operate in this way.

Youth organizations are valuable in themselves, not just as they relate to later more formal political involvement. It is also the case that community service can lead to political activity, especially when it is accompanied by reflection on the conditions within the system that create unjustified levels of inequality or fail to take citizens' input into account.

Schools are places where nearly all youth spend large amounts of time each week. They are

public places with many opportunities to foster public values. Although recent research has shown that taking civic education classes does make a contribution to what students know, many school programs designed to transmit information about government or appreciation of the role of citizens in democracy have failed to engage substantial groups of young people. Simply requiring more hours of the same kind of instruction is unlikely to be an adequate solution to the problem we have identified. Schools need to go beyond the transmission of knowledge to foster skills and dispositions of citizen involvement among all students.

Research and reflection about practice suggest that education for participation in civil society and the political system should be implicit in all aspects of schooling. Civics should also be explicitly taught in courses required at certain grades using materials that make it engaging for students. Improved civic education in school must institute high expectations for the acquisition of meaningful knowledge and for active and even critical civic involvement. Instructional programs to realize these expectations require enhanced preparation of teachers. We can identify some elements of effective civic education, such as the opportunity to express opinions in classrooms and to be involved in the community and then to reflect with adults about the social issues raised. Much current educational reform, however, is going in other directions by focusing on students' test performance in reading, mathematics, and science.

## Supporting Programs with Research

The convening paper identified relevant previous research, the majority conducted in the 1960's or 1970's. Findings in this area, however, become dated as political circumstances and the demographics of the youth population change. In addition, there are issues which have never been thoroughly studied in a way that could inform program development. Reinvigorating research in the overlapping areas of youth development, political socialization, and civic education is thus a priority. Efforts should be made to identify differentiated ways to conceptualize political socialization and education for citizenship as it takes place both in and out of school. We also need to identify effective reforms, especially in communities where young people experience discrimination or marginalization and where the negative factors identified in the consensus paper are especially prevalent.

We need to develop multifaceted measures of civic knowledge, attitudes, and involvement, and to use them to compare young people cross-nationally as well as nationally. An effort to investigate what makes programs of civic education effective is also needed. The field would benefit from assessments of the context of civic education in a variety of community and political organizations. We need to know more about the motivation to participate and learn in this area and about the personal sources of healthy autonomy in decision making. Studies which follow adolescents into early adulthood, examining how early investments of time serving the community relate to later political involvement, are also needed.

One of the most important by-products of new research would be methods and measures for evaluating existing or planned programs. This would also allow the formulation of design experiments with innovations in schools and youth organizations which are intended to foster involvement in civil society.

## Conclusion

The conference attendees hope that the Consensus Paper and the Background Document will serve as the first step in a process to revitalize reflective action in this area on the part of youth development specialists, educators, policy makers, researchers across a range of disciplines, funders, parents, and the general public.



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**Creating Citizenship: Youth Development for Free and Democratic Society**

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